

Chapter 9

Body, Discourse, and the Turn to Matter

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It ~~is~~ has become commonplace to say that language and meaning play a central role in our understanding of human practices. More recently, however, it has been claimed that “foregrounding material factors and reconfiguring our very understanding of matter are prerequisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century” (Coole and Frost 2). Such a “turn to matter” is sometimes seen as an urgent response to new developments in natural science thinking, the proliferation of bio-political, bio-ethical and technological conundrums, and the renewed centrality accorded to matters of political economy. But this materialist turn is complicated by the fact that it takes place in the wake of a series of other turns—the linguistic, affective, and discursive turns, for example. In this chapter I seek to articulate the intuitions and motivations of the “new materialists” within a theoretical framework that does not short-circuit the insights associated with preceding turns, in particular the discursive turn, and I frame my discussion of these issues around the question of “the body.”

Past discussions of the relative significance of discourse and matter have occasionally been declared rather stale, though not necessarily lacking in entertainment value. Debates on this topic have, for example, sometimes served as pretexts for realists and poststructuralists to trade well-rehearsed blows, generating more gladiatorial heat than intellectual insight. But my view is that these sorts of exchanges are triggered by legitimate, albeit thorny, issues awkwardly expressed. The great virtue of the “new materialist” intervention is its attempt to re-engage the topic by invoking new languages with which to better grasp these “thorns.” In particular, I draw on the work of William Connolly and Annemarie Mol as representative “new materialists” to show how their interventions problematize an overly drawn distinction between (discursive) meaning and (extra-discursive) matter (see also Bennett). I draw too on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as well as a range of psychoanalytically-inspired scholars, such as Darian Leader, David Corfield, and Slavoj Žižek, to further complicate the picture of a porous boundary between meaning and matter. I argue that a more complex picture helps us better grasp the importance of different sorts of matter. Apart from the extra-discursive matter typically invoked by new materialists, there is also a matter that can be qualified as *intra*-discursive. I construe this latter matter as *internal yet irreducible* to discourse, proposing therefore that the extra-discursive realm should not be understood to exhaust the non-discursive realm. If extra-discursive matter *exists* in the mode of giving material support to life and the universe, then

intra-discursive matter *ex-sists* in the mode of giving material support to fantasy. When thinking about the body in particular, both types of matter matter because both are potential sources of “becoming.”

Body over Matter

It has often been noted how contemporary practices associated with medical research and treatment in the Western world tend to systematically exclude the narrative dimension of life, restricting our understanding of bodily sensations and symptoms to the physiological processes underpinning them. In the UK, for example, general practitioners see their patients for an average of 6–8 minutes, and medical students devote next to no time during their training to the arts of listening and persuasion. One reason for this exclusion might be the hold the Cartesian mind-body picture continues to exercise over us. It also makes sense in light of the widely celebrated achievements in medical science over the last few centuries. But this hegemonic image of the body conceals a range of counter-images in the interstices of mainstream practices. There we find skepticism that a material-cum-causal image of the body is adequate to the task of proper and efficient care and treatment.

A number of scholars point to problems emerging when questions of meaning are excised from our image of the body—problems from the point of view of both explanation and intervention. These scholars focus on well-known phenomena that appear anomalous or difficult to assimilate from the point of view of modern medical science: conversion symptoms and other psychosomatic phenomena, “ghost” limbs, hypnosis, placebo effects, as well as a vast array of other less dramatic, but equally significant, phenomena. For example, with considerable frequency it is reported that key events, particularly those associated with significant separations and losses, can influence the timing of illness or death. These phenomena suggest that the meanings invested in our bodies are often as important as the material processes animating them. Given that a significant proportion of demands made upon health services have an identifiable social and/or psychological source, this should appear worrying for medical professionals, not to mention health ministers and taxpayers.

Of course, these scholars target not the value of medical science *per se*, but only various powerful tendencies to turn medical science into the only valid perspective when thinking about the body. They take seriously the vast number of anomalies thrown up in medical practice that point to the significance of meaning in understanding illness and wellbeing, as well as the insightful but poorly publicized research investigating these phenomena. As a result these thinkers have sought to substitute the hegemonic medical image of the body as organic matter with an alternative, more complex, image of the body—one that foregrounds the role of the narrative dimension of life, associated with meaning, culture, psychology, and emotion. Which image one adopts makes a difference, with often quite profound

implications for purposes of understanding and treatment. It is “the difference between saying ‘I’ve had the symptom for three months’ and ‘the symptom started when my wife left me three months ago’” (Leader and Corfield 47–8).

This problematization of conventional modern medicine suggests there is a much underestimated richness and complexity when it comes to how body, matter, and meaning interlock. In the remainder of the chapter I seek to conceptually map this complexity in a way that will make more visible its explanatory and critical implications.

Bodies Heavenly and Earthly

The image of the body as (organic) matter is hegemonic in medical science partly because of the success of the natural sciences as a whole. It is as if modern medical science takes the body and subsumes it under the category matter in the same manner that natural science subsumes planets or stones under matter. This, then, raises in a more general way the issue of how to apprehend the relation between meaning and matter, and it would be instructive to consider this more general question before reflecting on how the specificity of the body might connect up with it.

In the domain of natural science, meaning and matter are typically treated as two separate and parallel domains governed by distinct processes. For example: the laws of gravity govern the movement of the Earth around the Sun, but the meaning I, or my community, invest in these objects is an entirely different affair. Or to take another example: when I’m pushed off the edge of a cliff, I fall to the foot of the cliff and it matters little what I or anyone else thinks. This view has traction also when transposed to the body: if I take poison I shall fall ill or die, no matter what I or anyone else thinks.

The tendency to dichotomize matter and meaning so starkly is both powerful and compelling, informing quotidian and scientific practice alike. But the history and philosophy of natural science over the course of the last half-century has repeatedly probed and problematized the intuition underpinning this tendency. The question of how to think the relationship between meaning and matter has also been the source of considerable reflection by social scientists and philosophers. Philosophers of social science, just as much as philosophers of natural science, have been at pains to show how the properties of objects and subjects are subject to sometimes quite profound discursive shifts, thereby foregrounding a dimension of contingency which was not so visible before. The linguistic turn, in particular, signaled a shift in the way we understood the properties attributed to people, such as class, race, or gender. Instead of treating such properties as fixed or immutable, social and political analysts began to appreciate their constructed and thus contestable character.

Many would nevertheless insist that even if our understandings of such properties, whether natural or social scientific, were subject to discursive shifts,

acknowledging these shifts should not lead to the illegitimate conclusion that matter and meaning are interchangeable, or that matter is reducible to meaning. In this view, matter and meaning ought to still be treated as distinct and separate, even if we cannot apprehend this matter other than through our systems of meaning. This perspective draws considerable inspiration and energy from contemplating physical processes in opposition to human practices. This is because physical processes, such as those associated with the movement of heavenly bodies, embody for us in pure form those processes that are in no way parasitic on systems of meaning, even if our apprehension of them is. It is a view that takes language, subjectivity, and meaning to be a unique feature of the human condition, something entirely lacking in the physical world.

This discussion usually unfolds in terms of the broader opposition between the discursive domain (linked to meaning) and the extra-discursive domain (linked to matter): to say that our world is always-already discursively mediated is not to say that this world is reducible to discourse. Connolly picks up on precisely this point:

True, anthracite, merely a black rock in some contexts, becomes a crucial energy resource in a different ideational setting. But the shift from rock to energy resource is not *only* ideational. Try burning gravel in a potbellied stove to heat up your cabin. And anthracite is not ideational about itself. When anthracite becomes a key source of energy instead of, say, wood, oil, or nuclear power, the institutional complex into which it is inserted exerts distinctive effects upon the speed, curvature, and limits of cultural life. Try burning anthracite to power a jet plane. (19)

It is true that the meaning and significance of anthracite (as “rock” or “energy source”) cannot be derived from the notion of its mere existence. This is because existence appears on a plane that is “orthogonal” to the plane of meaning (being). As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe put it in their classic essay “Post-Marxism without Apologies,” “the existence of objects is independent of their discursive articulation” (85). Being and existence relate to each other transcendently, in the sense that existence is understood as a condition of possible being(s): “[i]t is *because* it [e.g., a mountain, wood, anthracite] *exists* that it can *be* all these things; but none of them follows necessarily from its mere existence” (Laclau and Mouffe 85).

However, Connolly’s ironic taunts about burning gravel in a potbellied stove, or about powering a jet plane with anthracite, express a deeper intuition which I believe Laclau and Mouffe would readily affirm: some ways matter gets embodied in discourse are more likely than others at the level of individual or collective practice, and this is in part because the world, in this case the natural world, has properties that constrain and enable our discursive interactions in specific ways. It is not anthracite’s mere *existence* that helps shape the world—its *properties* do. In other words, although Laclau and Mouffe suggest, quite rightly, that the being (*qua* meaning) of an object does not necessarily follow from its mere existence,

this should not trigger the relativist fear that “anything goes.” This is not only because “things only have being within a certain discursive configuration,” and this discursive configuration always takes on relatively stable and historically specific forms (85). It is also because we attribute a causal efficacy to this object that is independent of our apprehension of it.

The important point to note here is that at any one time, such discursive configurations will be internally complex and variegated, and this means that we can expect the discursive/extra-discursive distinction to find expression in any number of ways *within* the discursive realm itself. We could say, for example, that our phenomenological experiences cannot be algorithmically derived from the objective properties we attribute to natural processes. While “objective properties” may certainly point to an extra-discursive realm, our apprehension of them remains firmly within the discursive domain. The appeal to “phenomenological experience,” on the other hand, does not typically carry with it a claim about its faithful apprehension of an extra-discursive world. Nevertheless, both phenomenological experience and our understandings of objective properties belong to the realm of discourse. This redoubling of the discursive/extra-discursive opposition within discourse is a game changer since it enables us to recast all so-called “realist claims” in discursive terms.

Clearly, the distinction between first-person phenomenological experience *of* the world and third-person theoretical and observational statements *about* the world is not necessarily absolute. Nevertheless it has heuristic value and can carry important ontological implications. In fact, appealing to these two modalities of discursive apprehension offers us a way to appreciate what is at stake in the new materialists’ “turn to matter.” In this view, the turn to matter is a call to proliferate the effects the world has upon us (and vice versa) by engaging in a dialectic between third-person and first-person claims and in this way exploring and amplifying resonances between them. In my view such a turn to matter should not be understood as an attempt to supplant the discursive turn. Far from attempting to reassert some form of crude materialism by urging us to grasp the real substance of the world in an unmediated way, this “turn to matter” seeks to *deepen* the insight associated with the turn to discourse. As we have just seen, first-person experiences and third-person statements belong to the world of discourse. And this means, in part, breaking down the somewhat artificial division of labor that exists between natural scientists who purportedly focus on third-person statements about the world on the one hand, and the lay public who dwell in their first-person experiences of that world. New materialists insist that matter constrains (and enables), but they also suggest that our capacity to understand, probe, and even shape such constraints can be enhanced by engaging more actively and creatively in a discursive third-person–first-person dialectic.

What I have been trying to do, with the help of Laclau and Mouffe and Connolly, is to develop a perspective that takes this discursive turn seriously, enabling us to probe the discursive/extra-discursive relation a bit further. On the basis of our analysis so far, we can flesh out their relation in terms of distinct

processes: discursive processes and extra-discursive processes. The distinction discursive/extra-discursive now turns not on a transcendental moment (the existence of objects *qua* extra-discursive is a *condition* of their possible beings *qua* discursive) but on a moment of *faith*: our faith, as analysts, not simply that an extra-discursive process *exists*, but that *this process is not parasitic on subjectivity and thus discourse*. We *thus* arrive at the idea that an extra-discursive process is an *asubjective* process, while a discursive process entails some passage through the self-interpretations of subjects, even if our understanding of such a process is irreducible to these self-interpretations.

Take anthracite again. The claim here is that the detection, extraction, and burning of anthracite, as well as the harvesting and distribution of the energy produced by it, all involve a mix of discursive and extra-discursive factors. Asubjective processes, associated with gravitation, solid physics, and chemistry, mix with discursive processes associated with financial, scientific, and organizational practices. The central sorting question involves asking whether we think a particular process involves, as an essential part of its operation and functioning, a passage through a subject's discursive framework, whether conscious or unconscious.

The process by which an apple falls from a tree and strikes the ground does not entail a passage through a subject. This process is therefore an extra-discursive process. We have *faith* that the process itself is *asubjective*. In other words, we suppose that the integrity and identity of that process's functioning is independent of what anyone makes of it. Of course, in order to be made intelligible to a subject, this process will have to be discursively mediated: it will then be understood as a *discursively apprehended extra-discursive process*. Nevertheless, the distinction between a process functioning without subject and our discursive apprehension of this process is not trivial. It is the difference between saying "the movement of the apple is constrained/enabled by the force of gravity" and "the movement of the apple is constrained/enabled by our understanding of the force of gravity." The first statement sustains this faith, while the second collapses it. Or again: "the way anthracite responds to a flame is dependent on the properties of anthracite" versus "the way anthracite responds to a flame is dependent on our understanding of the properties of anthracite."

The above analysis merely foregrounds the following key insight implied in the turn to discourse: the fact that our apprehension of matter is always discursively mediated does not mean that we should avoid engaging with strong descriptive or ontological claims about the world. New materialists think that the discursive turn has resulted in our eschewing *of* ontological claims about the world and that this is not without normative and ethical consequences. They also imply in my view that this withdrawal is sometimes a result of misunderstanding the full implications of the discursive turn itself. Instead, we should fully embrace open explorations of the latest developments in the sciences, including complexity theory, neuroscience, and the new evolutionary theories. The "turn to matter," then, is actually a call to be *unafraid* to engage with third-person statements, and to use them actively in dialectical relation with our first-person phenomenological experiences.

We should do this without being afraid that some will construe such efforts as attempts to gain unmediated access to the natural world. In doing so, they suggest we would actually be taking on board the truth of the discursive turn in a more interventionist, albeit provocative, way. The new materialist hope is that a freer dialectical engagement of this sort will deepen our appreciation of the abundance and contingency of the world.

Body as Liminal Source of Becoming

What then are the implications of these reflections for how we should understand the body? In this section I argue that as we move from heavenly bodies to human bodies, the boundary between the discursive and extra-discursive becomes more obviously blurred. We can see this by first recalling how the distinction between the two realms was sustained primarily not in terms of a difference in content but rather in terms of our *faith* that a process is *asubjective* (or not). We can therefore ask what happens when our faith in the subject-independent nature of a process falters?

One response, of course, might be frustration, anxiety even, as we redouble our efforts to re-establish our faith in a world neatly divided into subjects and objects. Connolly, however, offers the prospect of an alternative response, one open to the possibility of “becoming,” rather than one preoccupied by how best to apprehend a given “being.” He argues for tactical suspensions of epistemological guarantees, urging us to engage in a wide range of experiments that would have direct effects on the discursive/extra-discursive boundary (and our understanding of this boundary). Where the body is concerned, then, this would involve actively shaping ourselves and others. This is one way to capture the intuition underpinning the “turn to matter.” In this case, an intervention would involve the clear operation of neither a discursive process nor an extra-discursive process. Instead, such an intervention would be better described in terms of the operation of a *liminal process* whose identity is constitutively ambiguous in the moment of the act.

Qualifying a process as liminal opens up a space in which to situate the performative dimension of the act of intervention, and thus the possibility of an excess of becoming over being. More broadly, however, the notion of liminality here indexes a sometimes quite dense inmixing of epistemological uncertainty, ontological complexity, and potential becoming. This generates the following three-fold distinction:

1. extra-discursive processes (let’s call these “mechanisms,” e.g., mechanisms linked to the movement of the stars and planets, or the natural reactions of anthracite)
2. discursive processes (let’s call these “logics,” e.g., logics linked to various individual and collective human practices)

3. liminal processes, that are impossible to identify as definitively extra-discursive or not, or impossible to disentangle, or simply spatially and temporally complex

Let us consider these claims more carefully now in relation to the body. Clearly the body has a material substrate, but is it true—as modern medical science implies—that the way this material substrate behaves is entirely independent of our experiences and of our understanding of that material substrate? As we saw in the previous section, it usually makes sense to say this of planets or anthracite, of metal or a block of wood, or of anything else to which we can impute the operation of *asubjective* processes. The question is whether there should be a difference in the way we understand the materiality of our bodies, as opposed to the materiality of metal and wood, and how this difference should be cashed out.

We could say that our everyday language expresses just such a qualitative difference. Consider for a moment a piece of metal and a block of wood joined together in the shape of a hammer. While we might say that the hammer does not work, or that the hammer is broken, it sounds awkward to say that our body “does not work” or that our body is “broken.” Perhaps this immediately-felt awkwardness registers something important about how subjects relate to their bodies in a way that is different from the way they relate to their hammers. We say instead that we are ill, or that we are in pain, or that our body hurts.

The suggestion here is that, when it comes to the body, there is a more obvious blurring of the boundary between meaning and matter, and scholars, among them Connolly, seek to develop a language with which to register and conceptualize this blurring effect. A whole panoply of Connolly’s neologisms move in this direction, for example: “neurocultural” (8), “biocultural” (63), “corporealization of culture” (85), the “inwardization of culture” (7), or “cultural inscriptions of corporeal processes” (85). These efforts form part of a broader attempt to overcome the tendency to view meaning and matter as entirely separate domains, a view reinforced by two dominant and widely circulated images of the body, namely, “body as matter,” and “body as meaning.” Such efforts by Connolly and others are motivated by the desire to offer a fuller explanatory and critical understanding of the body. Adopting a “body as matter” image to account for one’s illness, for example, may tend to encourage an overly dismissive attitude toward a person’s experiences and life narrative in accounting for this illness, a recent family bereavement for example. But a “body as meaning” image may regard the effects of chemical or hormonal imbalances, or brute physical differences in height or strength, as equally irrelevant to the way we experience life, including illness. Connolly argues we need to cultivate a different image of the body that is more complex because such images set constraints to, and have normative and ideological implications for, our way of life.

In this vein, Connolly pushes toward an image of the body construed in terms of a “multi-layered conception of culture” (62). This collocation does at least two things. First, it reinforces the significance of the discursive turn,

reminding us that our apprehension of the body is always-already discursively mediated. Second, however, it registers how such discursive mediation is itself complex and layered, and subject to combined and uneven development, comprising differences and interactions between a range of culturally inflected materializations. Viewing the body in terms of layers of cultural meaning enables us to simultaneously deepen the insight associated with the discursive turn and engage freely in ontological discussions about “being” and “becoming.” Connolly thus offers us a language with which to think about the body, its matter and its meaning. As we saw earlier, when it comes to the body, faith in our ability to identify a process as *either* discursive *or* extra-discursive is often difficult to sustain. The complexity and constitutive ambiguity of the identity of, and interaction between, extra-discursive and discursive processes are often daunting, demanding continual work on the part of the subject (e.g., via various forms of discipline and technique), often in conjunction with others, to reassert some degree of narrative authorship over one’s body and actions. It is for this reason that the body becomes a liminal source of becoming which calls for a subject with an open disposition and sensibility.

My second new materialist representative, Annemarie Mol, presents us with a particularly dramatic illustration of this complexity, drawing out its practical and normative implications in a medical context. Strongly influenced by the work of Michel Callon as well as her collaborative work with John Law, Mol focuses very much on the materiality of our bodies and practices. In her insightful study on the treatment of diabetes in the Netherlands, she provides a picture of the complex effects produced when the material dimension of the body interferes with one’s life narrative. Let us consider a case in which a physician transmits the most up-to-date research findings to a patient called Mr. Zomer (Mol 59–61, 64). Having been recently diagnosed as diabetic, and having learnt how to inject insulin and adjust his eating habits, this patient is informed by his physician that the latest medical research suggests that a tighter regulatory regime decreases the chances of future medical complications linked to neuropathy, as well as to the deterioration of arteries and eyesight. In this way the physician translates theoretical knowledge and empirical findings into more practical advice and intervention. Measuring his/her own blood sugar levels more regularly, for example, would help determine with greater accuracy what dose of insulin to prescribe. Mol then shows how this program of action generates interference effects when it bumps up against life. At the outset Mr. Zomer thinks the new regimen a small price to pay given the anticipated benefits and so agrees to undertake more regular monitoring of his blood sugar levels using a notebook. But the physician finds the notebook is hardly used on his next visit. One response might be to assume Mr. Zomer has changed his mind. One might accept his rather general explanation in terms of it all being “too difficult.” This type of response can appear efficient. It may even appear normatively attractive since it respects the patient’s privacy and choice. Another response, however, might be to offer emotional support and encouragement, while simultaneously probing for more detail about the difficulties and challenges he

faces. This may take time. It may involve rather embarrassing admissions about Mr. Zomer not feeling comfortable pricking his finger in the presence of his workmates at road construction sites (since the only place with any privacy is a dirty mobile toilet). Or it may involve rehearsing the monitoring procedure a number of times in the presence of a nurse, discovering, perhaps, that the device he has been given does not suit him.

According to Mol, a disease is not confined to the body conceived in terms of organic causal mechanisms: it interferes with a patient's life, and the patient, sometimes with the help of the physician or nurse, will have to consider how to negotiate or integrate new medical knowledge with everyday existence and experience. In this way, extra-discursive body matter, discursively mediated, interferes with life's narrative; and vice versa. The treatment of diabetes is thus "a part of ongoing practices: practices of care as well as practices to do with work, school, family, friends, holidays and everything else that might be important in a person's life." (53) Mol shows how this process of "attunement" between third-person statements and first-person phenomenological experiences is a long and arduous one, as unpredictable as it is sometimes surprising. But it is vital to proper care, in her words, to try "to attune everything to everything else" (61). In this view, "[n]othing is taken to be entirely fixed or entirely fluid. Technologies, habits, hopes, everything in a patient's life may have to be adjusted." (61)

In offering this detailed account of the practice of diabetic care Mol is sketching out the contours of a "logic of care," contrasting this with what she calls a "logic of choice." A care regime modeled on the logic of choice would, in effect, entail choosing between treatment regimes before undergoing the full treatment itself. This suggests it is possible to provide the patient with all the necessary information on the basis of which one could make a decision, even if with the advice of the physician. In leading up to the moment of decision, the patient would bring to bear his or her own personal experiences, meanings, and values, upon the theoretical and empirical knowledge presented: for example, what kind or intensity of treatment to choose. But this would imply drawing a rigid boundary between the body *qua* extra-discursive matter and the body *qua* discursive meaning. Or, insofar as this is redoubled within discourse, it would entail keeping separate and distinct the domains of third-person statements and our first-person phenomenological experiences. A regime informed by the logic of choice assumes that feedback effects between these two domains are either non-existent, insignificant, or not relevant to the decision. Mol's study presents us with many reasons to abandon this assumption. The incredibly complex feedback effects between matter and meaning mean that often we cannot have faith in our capacity to identify a process as discursive *or* extra-discursive, nor in the way these processes interfere with one another. Instead of lamenting this fact, we should affirm it, actively amplifying and exploring these feedback effects. So we should not accept "causal relations for what they are," Mol suggests. Instead we should "intervene in the lived reality of bodies" (44), acknowledging that such interventions interfere in unexpected ways, often transforming original aims (57).

No doubt such interventions and unexpected outcomes will often demand well-crafted support from medical professionals. Indeed, it is worth adding here how this complex model of care is further complicated by the fact that “offering support is not the same thing as doing what patients want” (29). Sometimes what a patient wants, though relevant, is not decisive and is something that itself needs to be worked on. But how a patient’s wishes are worked on is “a practical task, one that is experimental.” In the logic of care what gets construed as good or desirable does not come before the treatment. It is defined through the practice of care, thereby giving “ample occasion for ambivalences, disagreements, insecurities, misunderstandings and conflicts” (87). The way these processes interact and unfold is a matter to be discovered through practical experiments of intervention and living. To put this in Connolly’s terms, Mol is suggesting that patients require an environment in which such unpredictability and ambiguity can be affirmed, but she also points out that patients need support in negotiating and contextualizing these new pathways, particularly in cultivating an ethos of openness to contingent encounters (88).

Mol’s study therefore helps us draw out the normative and potentially political implications of affirming the body as a liminal source of becoming. For example, insofar as market reforms of the health service entail the imposition of a logic of choice on the regime of health care, the above analysis would suggest that the possibilities of care “attunement” would shrink. Mol points out that care practices rarely take on the form of the discrete transactions and calculation that a logic of choice presupposes, and that trying to impose this latter model onto the medical care regime would seriously damage the prospects of patient care attunement.

One Body, Two Matters

We have seen how Connolly and Mol allow us to take forward in a productive way the insights associated with the discursive turn. They do this by foregrounding the dimension of matter in relation to the body and in relation to practices that take the body as a key focal point, but in a way that acknowledges and deepens the centrality of discourse and meaning in coming to terms with this material dimension. For Mol the fragility of the discursive/extra-discursive boundary carries normative import. The material exigencies thrown up by the body are often unpredictable, and therefore one should be ready to experiment with treatments in a way that promotes attunement with one’s life, overcoming practical obstacles when and as they arise. But all this requires time, patience and plentiful support, all things that a logic of choice tends to push to the margins of care. For Connolly, on the other hand, the ambiguous character of the discursive/extra-discursive boundary carries primarily ontological and ethical import. Affirming the boundary’s blurred character as a source of becoming through tactical interventions and experiments is seen primarily as a means of cultivating ethical sensibilities (such as an ethos

of “presumptive responsiveness and generosity”) or of overcoming less attractive sensibilities (such as existential resentment). This pushes us to

devise techniques and exercises to diminish existential resentment against the absence of ... guarantees in the world, for we suspect that visceral resentment of the absence of final guarantees promotes a punitive orientation to difference in many, blunts the capacity to nourish agonistic respect between interdependent constituencies, and diminishes critical responsiveness to new movements of cultural diversification. (Connolly 106; see, also, 82 and 105)

We have thus moved from an open call to affirm first–third person experimentation at the discursive/extra-discursive boundary, to a more urgent call to deploy techniques of the self and micropolitical acts for a specific ethical purpose, namely, to weaken our attachment to “final guarantees.” After all, Connolly reminds us, quite rightly too, that “[t]echniques of the self and micropolitics are critical to an expansive ethos of pluralism *as well as* to more closed regimes at odds with such an ethos” (20, emphasis added; see, also, 95).

Connolly generates many insights in his exploration of the material dimension of the body via the complexity sciences, neuroscience inclusive, and I have tried to capture these insights with the notion of a body as a liminal source of becoming. In what follows I wish to develop this framework further. In particular I highlight and amplify the psychoanalytic pathways open to Connolly, but in a manner that keeps alive the insights generated through his engagement with bio-neuroscience. Connolly does of course make frequent references to several key psychoanalytic ideas and figures. But their invocation does tend to highlight the rather obvious disproportionate emphasis he places upon the new sciences relative to psychoanalysis. No doubt, the fact that the psychoanalytic pathway is underexploited is not without reason. In fact the turn to neuroscience for Connolly carries a cautionary and pluralizing message. A whole slew of neuroscientific experiments suggest that not all that operates below the threshold of consciousness can or should be understood in terms of the Freudian unconscious. The pain felt in one’s phantom limb, for example, should not necessarily be understood or treated as if it were a symptom of a psychic trauma suffered in the past. Perhaps “the brain works below the level of intellectual attention to preserve an earlier image” that is neurologically materialized, the whole operation governed entirely by extra-discursive processes (Connolly 12). The turn to neuroscience thus cautions against temptations to explain all anomalies at the phenomenological level with reference to *either* extra-discursive matter *or* discursive meaning.

While Connolly’s motivation in bracketing our engagement with psychoanalysis is understandable it is still worth asking how its insights can be brought into contact with those gleaned from neuroscience and other biological and medical sciences. This can be done in a way that is immediately relevant to the agenda of the new materialists by building a contrast between two types of matter. The matter we have been most preoccupied with in this chapter so far is

what I have been calling “extra-discursive” matter. Broadly speaking, matter can be conceptualized in terms of the *limits* of discourse: matter may exert effects in discourse but, ultimately, matter is opaque to us and cannot be directly represented in discourse. Matter always escapes ultimate discursive capture. In qualifying matter as “extra-discursive,” however, I express our faith, additionally, that this matter behaves in accordance with processes that are *asubjective*. Extra-discursive matter and processes are *indirectly* represented and negotiated in discourse, through third-person statements and first-person phenomenological experiences. The extra-discursive, here, coincides with the *external* limits of discourse.

There is, however, another sort of matter. This also concerns the limits of discourse, implying again an ineliminable opacity. But these limits are understood to be *internal*, not external, limits. The nature of this matter, then, is of a qualitatively different sort, and serves as the central focus and target of psychoanalytic interventions. The distinction between third-person statements and first-person phenomenological experience indirectly inscribes an ineliminable opacity between the discursive and extra-discursive realms. But psychoanalysis points to a different gap *within* phenomenological experience itself. What we are dealing with here, then, is not extra-discursive matter, but *intra*-discursive matter. This matter is *internal* to discourse in the sense that it is a product of discourse yet, like extra-discursive matter, is *irreducible* to discourse. The Lacanian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek refers to two forms of opacity that can be usefully invoked to amplify the contrast I am building between two sorts of matter. These two forms of opacity refer to

the opacity of the generative medium (the biophysical brain process which sustain the experience of meaning, on which the experience of meaning locally supervenes) and the opacity *which is inherent to phenomenal experience as such*, the opacity of a mask or of a sign promising that there is something behind. When someone wears a mask, what imposes itself as the secret behind the mask is not what “really is behind,” the physical reality of the person’s face, but another opaque threatening dimension. The same thing happens when we look deep into a person’s eyes: the opaque abyss of the Other that we experience is not this person’s neuronal reality ... (Žižek 220)

This reference to two forms of opacity suggests that the extra-discursive realm should not be seen to exhaust the non-discursive domain. There is a space also for intra-discursive matter *qua* the internal limits of discourse, or “the real” in Lacanian terms. The real escapes our attempts to put things into words and give them meaning, and it is for this reason that it can so readily be connected to the field of desire and fantasy. Lacan makes this link via the category *objet petit a*. *Objet petit a*, or *objet a* for short, designates the object that causes desire: it conjures an image that simultaneously tempts the subject and yet remains inaccessible. Precisely because the existence of *objet a* tends to be experienced in the mode of “escape,” it serves as the condition and source of the subject’s fantasy life.

If *objet a* signals unfixity, fragmentation, infinity, the subject desperately seeks to transform this into its opposite: fixity and unity. Unbeknownst to himself the subject thereby performs a kind of alchemy, wherein *objet a* as absence and infinite regress is transformed into a full presence. The subject fixes *objet a* to something, anything: an image, an inert object, a body part, a symbolic role, another person, and so on. The subject thereby stabilizes her world of meaning by constructing a fantasy that serves as its guarantee. This is why the subject becomes so invested in its object of fantasy: it guarantees his universe of meaning. If the subject's relation to *objet a* is destabilized so too is the subject's universe of meaning. Fantasy uses the raw material of signifiers to construct a stabilizing pattern or relation between subject and *objet a*: $S \hat{a} a$. For example, someone's universe of meaning might be stabilized with reference to the formula "X helps Y" (Leader and Corfield 290; see also 201–2). So long as she can find identificatory support as "helper" (or "helped") in her relations with others, she is able to secure the necessary "affective satisfaction" to ground her sense of being. However, when this identificatory support is removed or threatened, the affective energy invested in that fantasmatic structure may have to find other avenues of expression.

How then, more precisely, can the role of fantasy be linked to the materiality of the body? One way of seeing this would be to revisit the question of illness and suffering discussed at the outset of the chapter. We saw there how the question of illness and the demand to be treated is not necessarily so straightforward. It is not straightforward because such treatment needs to take into account the specificity of that person's life: its meaning and practices. Both Connolly and Mol are attentive to the signifying dimension of life. Connolly shows how engaging with sophisticated natural scientific developments and a whole range of techniques of thought and micropolitics enable a productive dynamic of "becoming" to unfold—a becoming whose locus is the blurred discursive/extra-discursive boundary. Mol too can be said to apply pressure at the point meaning and extra-discursive matter intersect, though this source of becoming is guided primarily by pragmatic questions about how a patient can negotiate the intrusion of the body's material dimension into his or her explicitly affirmed life practices. Fantasy complicates this story because it suggests that meanings are not always so clearly apprehended by the patient herself, and that such opacity is not so much due to the impossibility of discourse touching extra-discursive matter, but, rather, due to the impossibility of discourse coinciding with itself—an impossibility linked to the (ontological) condition of human subjectivity as such.

We recall how psychoanalysis posits a split between conscious meanings and the (unconscious) fantasy life that structures those meanings. We could then say that the opposition meaning/fantasy redoubles, in discourse, the discursive/intra-discursive distinction. The subject responds to this (discursively unrepresentable) split by affectively investing in a fantasmatic object, this object often taking on a series of different names: fullness and bliss, or its opposite, lack and trauma. The story we have been telling about the body as a source of becoming thus takes on a more complicated hue, since the notion of "discursive processes" appearing

in the three-fold typology elaborated earlier admits of two interconnected sub-species that are helpful to distinguish: discursive processes linked to meaning, and discursive processes linked to fantasy. We can now point to at least three registers: the registers of meaning, extra-discursive matter, and intra-discursive matter. They are like points on an elasticated triangle that, depending on their density and proximity to one another, can create perturbations in each other's force fields, some more dramatic than others. When applied to the body, this might look a bit like this:

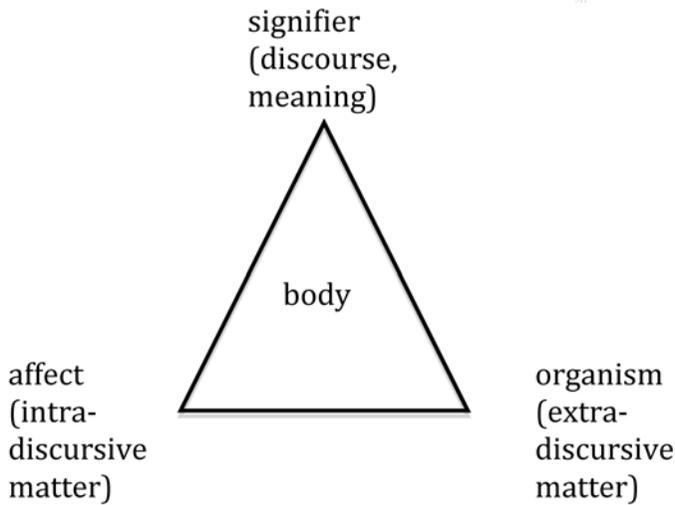


Figure 9.1 The Body Triangle

In a simple universe the three points find themselves pulled away from each other at some distance. In this universe, the boundaries between meaning, extra-discursive matter, and intra-discursive matter are relatively easy to maintain. Once meaning gets pulled into the orbit of intra-discursive matter, however, its field gets distorted and the boundary between them blurs. This constitutive ambiguity, then, becomes one source of liminal becoming, usually taken to be within the purview of psychoanalysis. Equally, however, the boundary between the realms of meaning and extra-discursive matter can blur, generating a second source of liminal becoming—this has been the central focus of Connolly and Mol's investigations. If natural science furnishes us with the sophisticated third-person statements about extra-discursive matter (in terms, for example, of observation statements, or theoretical statements about mechanisms and laws), perhaps psychoanalysis can be said to furnish us with the sophisticated third-person statements about *intra-discursive matter* (in terms of logics).

However, things become more complicated when the above triangle shrinks, bringing all three registers into close proximity with one another. This generates a rather potent source of liminal becoming because epistemological, ontological, and ethical registers tend to be in play simultaneously. Yet this latter instance should not necessarily be seen as exceptional or, indeed, rare. Its most essential precondition is easily stated, namely, that a particular extra-discursive bodily process achieves some form of discursive representation. Whether this representation partakes of conscious or unconscious life is secondary. What matters is that a discursive trigger has been installed. It is enough to think how often discursive processes trigger a whole range of physiological processes, from blushing and crying, to adrenaline surges on big occasions, to various physical reactions in sexual arousal.

Leader and Corfield show how this psycho-somatic short-circuiting effect applies to less obvious cases, such as heart disease, cancer, and the immune system, among others. They pay special attention to those cases in which it could be said that the distance between all three points in the above figure shrinks. And here the role of fantasy and intra-discursive matter becomes important. They suggest, for example, that illness often raises the question for the subject about his or her existence and thus fantasy. This is because illness can serve as a way to ask oneself what value we have and what we mean for others. One interesting question, then, might be how exactly this intra-discursive matter, via its fantasmatic expression, can find a way of registering itself in the extra-discursive materiality of the body. Leader and Corfield illustrate this process of registration with reference to a skin disorder case. A rash developed along the back of a soldier's legs from the buttocks down. Intriguingly, it was then discovered that his rash appeared shortly after he had been caught loitering outside the nurses' sleeping quarters. But the timing of the rash's onset was found not to be a coincidence: it was traced to a fantasmatic scene linked to a prior event when, as a pre-teen youth, the soldier had been punished for looking through the window of a girl's dormitory in search of his *objet petit a*. In fact, the nettle-like rash on the back of his legs turned out to have a transverse linear pattern that coincided with the print left by the whipping action meted out as punishment ten years earlier. There is thus a way in which (intra-discursive) logics of fantasy can mesh with (extra-discursive) organic mechanisms to make this curious, though not necessarily uncommon, state of affairs possible. Pain and inflammation are a typical response to injury, but what is usually not emphasized is the role feedback mechanisms play in maintaining the inflammation. Feedback systems carry impulses to the same skin nerve endings ~~but~~ in a direction of travel opposite to the painful impulses triggered by the whipping action. While their original purpose was to maintain inflammation and facilitate associated clotting mechanisms, the feedback system helps establish a bio-neuronal pathway that could be exploited again in the future. For example, Leader and Corfield note how "the same feedback system can be mobilized by hypnotic suggestion of injury. The implication, ~~then,~~ is that the same would hold for conversions involving the *fantasy or unconscious thought* of injury to the skin" (131).

The psychoanalytic insight here can also be expressed in terms of affect or libido. Affect names the energy the subject invests in his or her fantasmatic object. By providing the subject with a set of identificatory supports, fantasy enables the subject to derive a degree of affective satisfaction in one's activities and practices. However if, for whatever reason, the fantasmatic structure is put into question and the subject's fundamental identificatory supports are undermined, the libido is withdrawn and the search begins for alternative identificatory supports to which it can be bound. Absent these alternative identificatory supports, the affect may find that the body *qua* extra-discursive matter provides a means of "embodying," even if temporarily, the subject's internal discursive limits:

If we lose an identificatory support or are suddenly forced to put in question some meaning or an image that has been important for us, where does the libido take refuge? These moments will involve reinvestment. They are frequently associated with times of separation and loss. Something in the patient's world has changed, upsetting the pattern of libidinal investment. And this may produce a strange response in the body in the form of a physical illness. (Leader and Corfield 203; see, also, 92–3)

The consequences of this insight are quite profound. It implies that when the body suffers at a material, extra-discursive level and this suffering achieves some form of discursive representation, aspects of this extra-discursive "event" can, under certain conditions, be re-triggered. Those conditions include the discursive representation being pulled not just into the wider life narrative of a subject, but also, perhaps, into the gravitational field linked to its fantasmatic object. Thus, "[a]n illness in the past with no apparent psychological roots can then become reactivated years later either to express a symbolic message or simply as a response to a disturbing or psychically unpalatable event" (Leader and Corfield 131; see, also, 132). The possibilities are limitless, since the same illness can play a different role at different stages of one's life.

Foregrounding the role of intra-discursive matter and fantasy in this way introduces an extra layer of complexity in the picture offered to us by Connolly and Mol. Doing so obviates the risk, present in some instantiations of the materialist turn, of forgetting how negotiating pragmatically the obstacles put before one's life by an illness (*à la* Mol), or cultivating alternative more generous ethical sensibilities (*à la* Connolly), are a product of engaging in third–first person dialectics with respect to intra-discursive matter, not just extra-discursive matter. In fact, mapping out two sorts of matter in this way may help us better locate the intuition underlying many a new materialist interventions and expressed concerns, but in a way that does not underestimate the role that fantasy, and psychoanalysis more generally, can play in these tasks.

So far I have focused on the explanatory implications of foregrounding fantasy and affect as part of the ontology psychoanalysis sketches out for us. But these ontological insights carry important critical implications too, from both an ethical

and a normative point of view. Consider the ethical angle first. It is well-known that Lacan devoted considerable energy expounding an “ethics of psychoanalysis,” and this has been cashed out by many Lacanian scholars in terms of “crossing the fantasy.” What does this mean? In my reading the idea of “crossing the fantasy” points to the prospect of a mode of affective satisfaction that is not heavily bound up in the guarantees that a fantasmatic formula may offer its subject. Lacanian scholars invest considerable hope in the process of crossing the fantasy because, to put it in our terms, it signals the possibility of a liminal source of becoming. The loss of fantasmatic guarantees is of course perceived as a threat by the subject, but the process of crossing the fantasy is meant to be a way of showing that such a loss of guarantees can also be a source of creativity and a novel ethical sensibility. Indeed, the process of crossing the fantasy can be likened to a process of mourning, since coming to terms with the loss of guarantees is homologous to mourning the loss of a loved one. What we mourn when a significant other dies is actually the loss of our attachment to a certain idea we have of them, an attachment that served as a guarantee of our existence because it offered support to our life, from the point of view of meaning and affect.

What is required for an (ethical) process of mourning to unfold? First and foremost it requires some means of sketching out the contours of the fantasy. Typically, fantasy is kept at some distance from one’s conscious awareness. Therefore, the process of mourning demands listening skills. What echoes can be heard resonating behind the explicit statements and actions of a subject? But, second, what is demanded to propel the mourning process forward is some means of registering or discursively capturing what lies beneath the surface of immediate awareness. Such mourning processes can take a long time, but they all involve a process whereby the subject, often with the support of others, turns around his or her *objets a* in progressively smaller concentric circles. Where such symbolic means of reinscription are lacking the body may come to serve as the raw extra-discursive matter within which to express and bind the subject’s affect. Consider, for example, general feelings of helplessness, or other feelings linked with the recent loss of a friend or relative. Leader and Corfield argue that we can draw a *prima facie* distinction between those situations in which someone believes they are able to express anguish, and those situations in which someone does not have the discursive means of doing so, suggesting that “one’s susceptibility to illness might actually increase if one hadn’t found a way of *articulating* the feelings of impasse and failure ...” (271).

What normative implications follow from this analysis? As was the case in Mol’s analysis of the treatment of diabetes, it is clear that here too a care regime dominated by the logic of choice is wholly inappropriate. There are two reasons for this. First, mourning takes time. It is accompanied by a great deal of uncertainty about how the process will unfold, what obstacles will emerge, and whether those obstacles will be successfully overcome. Mol emphasizes the importance of communication skills on the part of professionals tasked with helping patients pragmatically tackle obstacles in a way that could bring the materiality of the their

bodies into “tune” with their life narrative. The emphasis here, however, is more on *listening* skills, honed to detect the manner in which the body’s extra-discursive matter has been caught up not just in the subject’s life narrative, but also in the subject’s fantasy life. The exercise and aim of these sorts of communication and listening skills are entirely at odds with a logic of calculation that requires treatment options and trajectories to be laid out in advance of the subject’s decisions. The second (not unrelated) reason for rejecting the logic of choice in this domain has to do with desire. Dislodging fantasmatic guarantees is unsettling and so the process of mourning may often involve rubbing up a subject’s desires in unexpected, even unpleasant, ways. Yes, there must be some sort of analytic support in the process and the subject’s wishes are not irrelevant. They are not, however, the be all and end all. This is as true in the case of diabetic care as it is in treating conversion symptoms. The patient’s wishes reach a limit in two different ways. In the first case they reach a limit while negotiating the ambiguous and uncertain relation between life narrative and extra-discursive materiality. In the second case they reach a limit negotiating the boundary between life narrative and intra-discursive materiality. Both reasons outlined here strongly and unambiguously indicate the need to pay attention to the social and psychic dimensions of illness, as well as the collective aspects of treatment. These approaches, therefore, resonate with other critical perspectives that militate against powerful tendencies to individualize illness and wellbeing.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to engage with a set of issues that touch on the relationship between discourse, matter, and critique. I began by suggesting that what I call the “turn to matter” harbors a productive intuition worth mining. Crudely put, new materialists suggest we should take more seriously the extra-discursive matter lying at the limit of discourse. We should not bind ourselves exclusively to first-person self-interpretations; nor should we be satisfied merely with contextualizing those self-interpretations in wider webs of meaning. New materialists, among whom I count Bill Connolly and Annemarie Mol, do not, of course, imply that it is possible to grasp extra-discursive matter in a way that is discursively unmediated. Even so, it is possible to gain some traction on this extra-discursive matter through sophisticated third-person statements, sometimes developed in terms of formal languages like mathematics, and often in conjunction with experimental techniques of one sort or another. The aim of new materialists is to play with, and amplify, the effects of a third–first person dialectic. In these efforts I discern a way to understand the body as a liminal source of becoming. Liminal, because the processes at work are sometimes ambiguous as to their status: are they discursive, extra-discursive, or something else besides? A source of *becoming* because, acting *as if* it were one or the other, or simply acting in the face of ambiguity, often involves a non-trivial performative and thus creative dimension

that contributes decisively to processes of identity and corporeal formation. New materialists invest considerable hope in this first–third person dialectical exchange, because they see it as a way of contributing to a process of attunement (Mol) or because they see it as a way to help cultivate ethical sensibilities (Connolly). So the motivation of the new materialists is both explanatory and critical. While Mol’s aim has been explanatory and normative, Connolly’s aim has been primarily explanatory and ethical.

However, in drawing our attention in these ways to the importance and malleable quality of extra-discursive organic matter, does the new materialist emphasis on experimental interventions, techniques of the self, and micropolitical acts not risk marginalizing and thus underestimating the effects and potential productivity of another sort of matter, which I have qualified as *intra*-discursive? This point could be put more strongly of course, since there are bound to be cases in which engaging dialectically with *intra*-discursive matter may serve as precondition for cultivating the sort of practical attunement and ethical sensibility that many new materialists are keen to promote. I have thus sought to stave off this risk by pluralizing our understanding of matter *qua* discursive limits. Such limits can be understood to be external to discourse, but they can also be understood as internal. In the latter case, internal discursive limits find their most clear and succinct expression in the guise of fantasy. But the general point is that extra-discursive matter need not be understood to exhaust the domain of non-discursive matter. I thus argued that because Lacan (though, of course, not just Lacan) offers us important insights about how to engage with fantasy, we could use psychoanalysis to capitalize on the idea that we can have third-person statements also about discursive processes that encircle *intra*-discursive matter. In other words, the exploration of the material dimension of the body can be enhanced by engaging more deeply with the discipline of psychoanalysis, not just the sciences of complexity.

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